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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001901

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PINR KDEM RP

SUBJECT: SENATOR AQUINO DECLARES PRESIDENTIAL BID

REF: A. MANILA 1856 (MOMENTUM FOR AQUINO PRESIDENTIAL
BID GROWS)
B. MANILA 1845 (DEFENSE SECRETARY DISCUSSES
ELECTION PROSPECTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Appearing more confident and self-assured after a week of introspection, Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino announced September 9 his intention to run as the Liberal Party candidate for president in the May 2010 election. Aquino, son of late President Corazon Aquino and assassinated Senator Ninoy Aquino, said he would carry out a grassroots campaign centered on clean government, equal justice and education reform. Alone among the presidential candidates, he also focused on the need for dialogue with Muslim insurgents in Mindanao, saying the alternative was endless fighting. Senator Aquino acknowledged to an audience of Aquino loyalists and civil society activists that he is getting a late start against a field of well-funded opponents, but his backers hope a nationwide "Give a Peso for Noynoy" fundraising campaign can spark broad popular support that builds on the national outpouring of admiration that accompanied his mother's funeral last month. End Summary.

CONFIDENT START

12. (U) On the early morning of September 9, Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III confidently announced to the public his intent to seek the Philippine presidency, following days of seclusion at a convent where he says he carefully contemplated the decision. Speaking to Aquino family loyalists, leaders from his Liberal Party (LP), civil society leaders, and journalists at conference in a crowded room at Club Filipino -- where his mother, Cory Aquino, took her oath of office in 1986 -- the Senator spoke clearly and directly about his desire to serve the nation, reading his speech with uncharacteristic confidence. He presented his decision as emanating from a strong popular desire among ordinary Filipinos for him to seek the presidency and continue his parents' fight for democracy. Aquino acknowledged LP President Mar Roxas' gracious withdrawal last week from the presidential race (ref A) and gave him the option of being his running mate, but did not announce a formal decision on the matter.

NON-TRADITIONAL CAMPAIGN

13. (C) Noynoy Aquino's press conference in an unadorned and cramped room at the Club Filipino, and held at the unusual morning rush-hour time of eight o'clock, portends a non-traditional election campaign for this relatively inexperienced senator. The event was notable for its lack of

choreography. Without even a chair to sit on when he first entered the room, Aquino delivered his speech from a piece of crumpled paper, wearing a casual polo shirt, and speaking loudly (but with confidence) over a faulty sound system. The potential symbolism of the date of this important announcement, held on the ninth day of the ninth month in 2009, appears to have eluded the senator, who chose eight o'clock for the event (and not nine o'clock), when Manila's masses were stuck in traffic on rain-swollen streets rather than in front of their television sets.

¶4. (C) Though lacking polish on its first day in the public eye, Aquino's campaign appears poised to become nationally significant. A fund-raising movement called "Give a Peso for Noynoy" (Piso Para kay Noynoy) was launched to encourage ordinary citizens to donate money for the new candidate and become active in his campaign. While he admitted to showing up late for an election campaign that will be extraordinarily expensive to run, Aquino expressed hoped that the support of ordinary Filipinos would help propel his candidacy forward.

REFORMIST, PRO-PEACE PLATFORM

¶5. (C) In a question-and-answer session following his declaration, Aquino offered glimpses of his vision to make democracy work better for Filipinos: clean governance through leadership by example, speedy and equal justice for all citizens, educational reform, and continued dialogue with insurgents. "We should not stop talking," he said about government negotiations with Muslim separatists in Mindanao,

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"because when we do, it's war, war, war." He underscored the need for more dialogue with the Muslim rebels, more open lines of communication, and better intermediaries. He promised to make democracy work better not only for the rich and well-connected but for the rest of Philippine society, and while he said he would prosecute corrupt government officials, he also proposed using a "carrot" instead of a "stick" to straighten up the bureaucracy. "I want to be remembered as a President who will be missed when I step down. I have to be able to show a list of accomplishments and say I was true to the people and served them well," Aquino said, a clear reference to the low public approval ratings of current President Gloria Arroyo.

COUSIN VS. COUSIN FOR PRESIDENT?

¶6. (C) Aquino's announcement comes against the backdrop of an important recent endorsement by provincial governors for the presidential candidacy of Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro, Noynoy Aquino's cousin and a fellow scion of the elite Cojuangco-Aquino clan. Teodoro's flagging campaign received a significant boost last week when 49 governors loyal to the Lakas-KAMPI-CMD ruling coalition of President Arroyo endorsed Teodoro to be the ruling party candidate over his coalition rival, Vice President Noli DeCastro. The governors' move drew praise from President Arroyo, who has been stinting in her public praise for Teodoro, a fact lamented by Teodoro in recent comments to the Ambassador (ref B). Aquino's announcement will likely increase pressure on the ruling coalition to choose its candidate before the end of the month. Secretary Teodoro will shorten his current visit to the U.S. in order to return home to lobby his party's coalition, which is facing increasing internal turmoil.

LIBERAL PARTY OPTIMISTIC

¶7. (C) Senator Aquino noted in his remarks that he had offered the vice presidential spot on the ticket to Liberal Party President and fellow Senator Manuel "Mar" Roxas, who stepped aside in favor of Aquino in an emotional press

conference last week, but there was no formal announcement or acceptance by Roxas. Still, LP spokesman and legislator Lorenzo Tanada III told us that Roxas was certain to join Aquino on the ticket as the VP candidate. While no nationwide polls have yet tested Aquino's popular standing, Tanada claimed "preliminary, unscientific" sampling in the country's largest provincial cities showed Aquino placing first in Davao and second in Cebu.

¶8. (C) Tanada dismissed media speculation that other candidates could drop out of the race to rally behind Aquino. He fully anticipated the other major parties would field their own candidates, and he acknowledged that Aquino had far less funding available than some of his rivals. Nevertheless, Tanada believed that many Filipinos would feel inspired to contribute efforts and resources to Aquino's campaign. He also claimed that Aquino could redefine the race, making character the central issue.

RIVALS SCOFF

¶9. (C) Shortly after Aquino's announcement, House Minority Leader Ronaldo Zamora, actively working on behalf of rival candidate Senator Manuel Villar, opined privately that Aquino entered the race "too late" to have a chance of winning. Zamora said Aquino lacked the necessary money and organization to compete successfully, and the political class would be uninspired by his performance as a legislator. Zamora acknowledged, though, that Aquino was the one candidate with "game-changer" potential, making him the most significant threat to Villar. Other parties' figures have not appeared intimidated by Aquino's entry into the race. Former legislator Prospero Pichay, a staunch supporter of President Arroyo, privately derided Aquino as "a joke," claiming he was far too inexperienced to run for or serve as President.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Senator Aquino's confident, energetic announcement today was a stark contrast to his diffident performance last week, when he appeared unwilling or unable to sustain the

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momentum created by Senator Roxas' decision to abdicate in favor of his colleague. Aquino's spiritual retreat with the Catholic nuns who served as his mother's spiritual advisors appears to have strengthened his conviction to launch a full-fledged campaign. It remains unclear whether Aquino can turn his shy, reserved qualities into strengths, appealing to voters by portraying himself as a man drawn reluctantly into the race by the will of the people rather than by ambition. However, in the span of just one week following his personal sequestering, he seems to have grown in confidence to carry out a grassroots campaign in the spirit of his mother and father, who are the most widely cherished figures in Philippine politics. Aquino may be perceived as having had a lackluster political career, but he also appears to have a relatively clean record with no baggage of scandals, which could be a distinct advantage.

KENNEY